

## Grain bin toll heightens fear for harvest

LEWISTON, Minn. – The corn wasn't flowing out of the grain bin any longer, so farmer John Daley stepped inside to look more closely.

The corn clumped together and rose higher at the sides, and as Daley stepped onto an outer patch of grain, normally packed enough to be sturdy, his feet crashed through and he tumbled toward the center. Corn raced up like a rockslide to his chest and into his mouth and nose — dusty and dry, the stuff they feed hogs.

It took Winona County firefighters who had been freshly trained in a grain bin rescue course nearly three hours to pull out the 80-year-old Daley. He would have suffocated if he had shared the fate of most farmers engulfed by grain.

Despite widespread technological advances on farms, dozens of people each year become trapped in grain bins — leading to many deaths that experts say are usually preventable.

With harvest season set to begin, some in the agricultural industry worry that farmers are particularly vulnerable as a likely record corn crop of 14 billion bushels pushes vast amounts of grain into storage.

While U.S. grain bin accidents have fallen from a peak of 59 in 2010, they have crept up again in recent years.

In June, the number of people entrapped in grain bins nationwide already had surpassed last year's total of 33, said Bill Field, a Purdue University researcher who tracks such incidents.

"Nationwide, this trend ... should be on the decline, but it's not," he said.

Rescuers pulled a Breckenridge, Minn., man from a grain bin last week, while a second farmer in northern Iowa survived a similar accident. In June, a 9-year-old boy in southeast Wisconsin died after climbing into a grain bin on his family's farm. A man in Granite Falls, Minn., three men in North Dakota and a man in Iowa also died in the last 14 months. Two other men in rural Minnesota were rescued in separate incidents this year.

Precise numbers are hard to come by because the Occupational Safety and Health Administration doesn't have jurisdiction over the small family farms where grain bin accidents commonly take place. And many of the accidents are never reported if they are not fatal, researchers say, rendering Purdue's numbers smaller than the true figure.

The Upper Midwest, where corn remains king, has accounted for nearly a third — 337 — of grain bin entrapments since Purdue began tracking the problem in 1964. Minnesota, the Dakotas, Iowa and Wisconsin saw at least five reported accidents in 2013, while the Star Tribune counted at least 12 so far this year based on news reports.

"You're moving more grain, there's more chances for accidents," said Dale Ekdahl, who sells rescue equipment and runs a grain bin rescue center in northwestern Minnesota. He started the enterprise four years ago, after a 9-year-old in Herman, Minn., died in a grain bin.

"Believe me, it's a really, really dangerous business nowadays."

Grain already piled up

Grain bin entrapments can happen when farmers step into a grain bin alone — particularly if they've left the auger running.

“It only takes a minute at the rate that grain flows,” said Field. “They’re buried beyond where they can escape on their own, and often they’re working alone, so there’s no one there to shut the system off.”

As farmers produce bigger crops, grain bins have also multiplied and become larger.

More recently, trains busy carrying crude oil from North Dakota’s Bakken region have delayed grain shipments across the Upper Midwest. That’s left more grain sitting in bins and elevators even before the harvest begins.

*Source: Minneapolis Star Tribune*